DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 264 631 CS 505 166

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TITLE Adding Glamour to Theory: Experiencing Theory in the Basic Course in Interpersonal Communication.
PUB DATE Nov 85
NOTE 25p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (71st, Denver, CO, November 7-10, 1985).
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052) -- Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Course Content; Higher Education; Integrated Activities; *Interpersonal Communication; *Learning Activities; *Periodicals; Speech Curriculum; *Speech Instruction; *Teaching Methods; *Theory Practice Relationship

ABSTRACT

Focusing on the use of popular magazines in interpersonal communication instruction, this paper argues that such magazines can provide a rich source for application and criticism of interpersonal communication processes in everyday life. The first section of the paper reviews research and criticism dealing with the content of magazine articles that offer advice on interpersonal relationships and related topics, noting that such research and criticism are rare in the field. The second section provides a framework for integrating popular literature into the interpersonal course by discussing three methods of integration: critique application, discussion application, and role-play application. The third section of the paper describes in detail a critique application given in a basic interpersonal communication course, characterizes the students who completed the assignment, presents results of a questionnaire administered to those students, and examines the implications of such an assignment as well as its utility. A copy of the questionnaire is appended. (FL)

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Adding Glamour to theory:
Experiencing theory in the basic course in interpersonal communication.

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A paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association, Denver, Colorado, November 1985.

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the use of popular magazines in interpersonal communication instruction. Section one reviews previous research and argues that criticism is a neglected activity in many basic courses in interpersonal communication and that popular magazines provide a rich source for application and criticism of interpersonal communication processes in everyday life. Section two suggests three ways to enhance interpersonal theory instruction using popular magazines. Lastly, section three highlights a particular application and provides a summary of student reaction, as well as, a rough measure of the utility of such an assignment.

A Neglected Resource

Galvin and Cooper (1981) argue that a major goal of communication education scholarship is "development of teaching strategies for effectively expanding the functional repertoire of communication learners using socially relevant contexts" (p. 220). In interpersonal communication many instructors often face the task of designing instructional strategies which include an application. Often such lessons provide the opportunity for in-class conversation and dyadic exercises illustrative of course concepts. Some strategies may include conversations and observations outside of the classroom as well. An aim of many of these strategies is to reinforce theoretical concepts through application in "real situations." It is hoped that by doing this the student will be better equipped to demonstrate his/her skills and competence in everyday interactions with others.

In considering the types of activities students of basic interpersonal communication are exposed to we find three general types: verbal exercises, observations of others interacting, and written self-reflections often in the form of a journal of some kind. These three general types provide the student with exposure to a variety of people in a variety of communication situations so that the student can ex-

perience and observe communication processes as well as reflect on his or own communicative habits. It is these types of exercises which serve to reinforce course concepts and to provide the student with practical "hands on" experience with the subject. While these types of activities are essential to a basic course in interpersonal in my opinion, there is one type of activity which does not seem to be included very often and one that does not fit readily into the three types of activities previously mentioned; exercises and applications focusing on criticism.

In everyday life we are bombarded with magazines and newspapers which purport to tell us how to live our lives "better" and how to get along with one another "better" (especially with our loves and family members). Many of these popular sources are read by millions and may be relied on by many readers as informational resources about interpersonal communication processes. Students of interpersonal communication are no exception. Often, in my own interpersonal courses, students have provided me with copies of articles they have recently read pertaining to a variety of course topics. I have often utilized such articles in a variety of ways of which I will describe more in section two of this paper.

Reasearch specifically focusing on popular magazines dealing with interpersonal communication is sparse. Often scholars may neglect such literature for a variety of rea-

sons. These reasons can range from "The popular article provides little or no detail of interpersonal processes" to "These types of articles are unscientific and are written for the masses of which I am not a part." However, one article appearing in the Quarterly Journal of Speech (1975) by Virginia Kidd took up the task of reviewing and criticizing the popular literature focusing on interpersonal advice in magazines.

In her article, "Happily Ever After and Other Relationship Styles: Advice on Interpersonal Relations in Popular Magazines, 1951-1973, Kidd (1975) employs a method of criticism whereby she develops two rhetorical visions portrayed by the magazines she reviews. She was interested in determining what kind of "reality" popular magazines created for readers with respect to how they should structure and live their lives. In her Vision 1, relationships are unchanging and role governed. "Fundamental to Vision 1's ideal was that an individual should make others happy. Paramount to among the suggestions for accomplishing this goal was the admonition...the putting aside of self...defined as loving behavior, and conversely thinking of one's self first was unloving and displayed lack of genuine concern for others" (Kidd, 1975, p.34). Kidd describes Vision 1 article topics to include: the giving of compliments and how to listen attentively even when listening to a bore. Conflicts in Vision 1 are indicative of problems and are to be avoided by "putting

the other first in an attempt to avoid any incident which might cause the other discomfort" (Kidd, 1975, p.34).

Vision 2 on the other hand emphasized change, self, and the theme of "we can talk it out" (Kidd, 1975, p. 36). Other characterisitics included attempts to find the "real self" due to a lack of prescribed rules which a person could follow when interacting with another. The self became the anchoring point. Other themes which emerged were loneliness and indifference and articles focused on how to overcome these two difficulites in great number.

Kidd concludes her article with speculation about the affect of these articles and their visions on the reader's own interpersonal life. "First, the impact of any popular journal is limited and somewhat defined by the journal's readership. With the exception of the Reader's Digest and Coronet, the magazines carrying the bulk of the articles on interpersonal relations had predominantly female readerships" (Kidd, 1975, p.38). According to Kidd the journalistic slant seems to place women in the responsible role in interpersonal relations. "Second, the short length of the magazine articles, fundamental to the journal's form, lends itself to the deception that communication in close human relationships can be attained so easily that the process can be explained in two thousand words or less with space left over for the toothpaste ad" (Kidd, 1975, p. 39).

Kidd's article is useful as it points out that many millions of people read such journals and potentially are exposed to visions of how relationships should work without a basis, other than one's own experience, to critically evaluate this work. If a person has no other basis from which to view interpersonal relationships in everday life, such popular magazines take on great potential for influence, influence which may lead to more serious relational problems.

In the basic interpersonal communication class it is important to acknowledge that this body of information does exist and that reading it and seeking advice from it needs to be done critically and skeptically. In the basic interpersonal course students are being taught a relational vision that views relationships as very complex and intricate and approaches to problems that are anything but simplisitc. An important task of the basic course is to teach students how to apply interpersonal theory to these popular journals so that the value of the article can be extracted and the harmful prescriptions avoided. In addition, exposure to such sources can serve as useful sources of application and potentially rich classroom discussion aids for the variety of topics covered in such literature.

The next section of this paper provides suggestions for how this goal might be accomplished and the magazines used.

Applications Using Popular Magazines

This section will provide the framework for integrating popular literature into the interpersonal course by discussing three methods of integration: critique-application, discussion-application, and role-play application.

Critique-application

The first method focuses on using popular articles as objects for criticism. In this application current theory covered in class is brought to bear on the popular article. Students take what they have been exposed to in theory and evaluate the article on the basis of current scholarly thought. This can be accomplished via an in class critique session where each student is responsible for an article to summarize and critique for the class or a single article read by all can be the basis for the critique. It can be done via oral reports or written reports such as a semester paper project. The goals of critique-application include: 1) To determine whether or not the article is consistent with current scholarly thought; 2) To determine if advice provided in the article will lead to desired outcomes; 3) To determine what use the article can have given criticisms; and 4) To demonstrate that criticism is a useful endevour designed to enhance understanding and bring forth knowledge.

In leading discussions focused on criticism it becomes the instructor's responsibility to also critically evaluate student contributions and to draw out criticism from those areas that students assume are solidly developed points. More often than not students will initially believe most everything they have read until the teacher begins to question the assumptions or the assertions made in the article. This should be done in such a way as to demonstrate that criticism often begins by questioning some of the basic assumptions of the article and its implications in the real world.

Discussion-application

In this method of integration the popular magazine article is used along with the course text to enhance the discussion of a particular point through illustration. Popular magazine articles often include many narratives and anecdotes which can be used by the instructor to illustrate a point. For example, if eye behavior is being covered as a topic the popular magazine article by Kate White in Glamour (September, 1984, p. 47-52) titled "Eye Power" could be brought into the discussion. The article focuses on one woman's attempt to test some of the normative rules with respect to eye behavior of men and women by violating many rules and staring at people in a variety of contexts. The article would serve to illustrate while not necessarily being the focus of active criticism. In terms of highlighting particular points or

providing real world examples popular magazines are very useful to the classroom teacher.

It is often informative and fun for students to bring in a few of these types of articles and take some of the quizzes which many popular magazines have with respect to a wide variety of topics. Students often begin to criticize without you even asking, even though you tell them this is purely for fun!

Role-play-application

The goal of this method of integration is to act out, in a role play situation, the advice given in a popular magazine article in order to observe and study the implications of such advice. A particularly good topic for such role plays is initiating conversations with members of the opposite sex. The popular magazines are filled with a wide variety of articles pertaining to flirting or the art of meeting people. One recent article, "The art of meeting men...or flirting" by Joyce Jillson in Glamour (December 1982) is especially representative.

These articles often contain advice that can be especially open to a wide variety of abuse and misunderstandings. Often articles will suggest that a woman strike sexually suggestive postures and touch men in ways that may suggest more than "I am interested in carrying on a conversation with you." These misunderstandings can be role

played in class by asking the players to follow the advice given in the article while playing a "scene" such as at the Cafe after school waiting for a friend. After the scene and its inevitable misunderstandings it is important to ask the participants how it felt to have to follow such advice and for their estimation of what would happen if they were to try it in real life. Then it is very important to discuss ways to improve on the advice so that it can be a learning experience of positive and productive ways of initiating conversations with others.

The last section of this paper illustrates a critique-application used in a basic interpersonal communication course at a large midwestern university and provides student feedback as well as approximations of the utility of such an assignment.

Illustration of an Application

This section describes in detail a critique-application given in a course in basic interpersonal communication. First the assignment will be described. Second, the students who completed the assignment will be characterized. Third, the results of a self-report questionnaire administered to those students choosing this option will be summarized and discussed. Lastly, implications of such an assignment and its utility will be discussed.

The Assignment

Students were instructed that one option for a final paper in the course would be to select a popular magazine article, summarize it, and to determine if it is consistent with theory and concepts covered in the course. They were to include the reference to the article and if possible a copy of the article. They were provided with a suggested way to organize the critique: 1) describe the audience; 2) summarize the article ; 3) determine whether or not there exist any inconsistencies with respect theory and course concepts; 4) cite the strengths and weaknesses of the article; and 5) discuss whether it would be useful for its intended audience or harmful. It was to be typed, double

spaced and no less than six typed paged excluding bibliography. The paper was worth twenty-five percent of their final grade in the course.

The assignment was evaluated on four dimensions: adequacy and clarity of the summary and audience statement; depth and sufficent application of course material; accuracy of application of course material; and quality of the written presentation. The weights for each of the dimensions were: .2, .3, .4, and .1 respectively.

Student Characteristics

The students who selected the assignment were twenty-three out of a total of fourty-nine students. They were from two sections of the same basic interpersonal communication course. Of those who took the option nineteen completed a questionnaire pertaining to the assignment voluntarily at the end of the semester. Of these nineteen there were 3 males and 16 females. The average age was 20.1 years of age. 8 Ss were sophmores, 9 were juniors and 2 were seniors. Academic majors of the students volunteering to complete the questionnaire included: communication studies, public relations, pharmacy, psychology, nursing, finance, journalism and undeclared. The course is, as previously mentioned, an introductory level course with no pre-requisites.

The Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of 15 items designed to ask for feedback with respect to the assignment as well as their perceptions and attitudes with respect to popular magazines. A copy of the questionnaire appears in Appendix One. I will summarize responses to each of the questions below.

Why. Students were asked for reasons why they selected the option to critique an article. Responses were varied with the most frequent response being "I thought I would enjoy it and it took the least amount of time." Overall it did not appear to be too difficult for the students and many commented on enjoying it because they like to read popular magazines. A summary of the comments is provided in Table 1.

TABLE 1

Reasons for choosing assignment

Currently taking a related course in another department.
I enjoyed it and it took the least amount of time.
Wanted to apply what I know.
Too busy for the other options.
It did not sound difficult.
I think it is important to be critical of articles that say they will help people.
I like reading magazines and self-help articles.
A broad option.
The article provided the basis for the paper, that helped me organize my paper.
Because I read an article that reminded me of class.
It sounded like fun.
I found an interesting article.
Because I was interested in trying to apply what we've learned in class to something we see everyday.

Magazines. Students were asked to list the magazine from which they chose the article to critique. These included: Campus Times, Penthouse, Mademoiselle, Cosmopolitan, Glamour, Redbook, Seventeen, Woman's Day, Teen and Ladies Home Journal.

Frequency of reading. Students were asked how often they read the magazine from which they chose the article they critiqued. Results were: 52% sometimes read it; 21% read it fairly often; 15% never read it; and 12% read it very frequently. This shows that students elect to expose themselves to the magazines outside of class. Also students were asked whether or not they subscribed to the magazine. Only two of the nineteen subscribed; one to Glamour and one to Mademoiselle.

Top three. Ss were asked to list their top three favorite magazines. For males this included: Time, Rolling Stone, Newsweek, Playboy, Sports Illustrated, Discovery and Omni. Time and Newsweek were each listed twice. For the females the most frequently listed were: Glamour, Cosmopolitan, Time, People, Mademoiselle, and Vogue. Others such as Sports Illustrated, Discovery, and Good Housekeeping were mentioned once. There are at first glance significant differences between the the types of magazines read by males and females. Even though only three males participated it is doubtful that other males read typically female magazines.

Fact and Fun. Ss were asked whether they saw the magazine they selected as more fun than fact, more fact than fun, or equally fun and fact. 63% said more fun than fact; 37% said equally fun and fact; and none responded more fact than fun. Those responding equally fact and fun chose the following magazines: Cosmoplitan, Redbook, Glamour, Woman's Day, and The Ladies Home Journal. It can be said that students seem to perceive that these magazines are for fun, but that some perceive some magazines to be factual sources of information.

Believeability. With respect to the content of the article they chose to critique 47% said they perceived their article to be mostly believeable; 42% said somewhat believeable; and 11% said very believeable. With respect to the statement "If it is in a magazine it must be true" 64% moderately disagreed; 16% slightly agreed; 10% slightly disagreed; and 5% moderately agreed and strongly disagreed. This indicates that most of the students would not necessarily believe everything in a magazine.

Comments. Ss were asked for open ended comments with respect to the usefullness of the assignment. These are summarized in Table 2 In general it can be said that the students found the assignment to be useful and more specifically a useful application of course concepts. In their response the word "application" occurred four times and comments directed at criticism of popular magazines in general were also very frequent.

TABLE 2

Summary of Student Comments

Yes, I learned how too abstract someone else's work.
It made the information learned in class applicable.
It required critical thinking and application of course material.
If you paid attention in class you could easily critique the article.
We got to use what we learned.
The assignment made me more critical of what I had read.
It allowed me to dig in deeper.
It was useful because it made me think of how magazines over-simplify and how inaccurate and misleading they can be.
It taught me how to use what I learned.
Yes, I learned the skills in the [texts] so much better because it forced me to understand the concepts.
I am more critical of other magazines now.
It made me think of the accuracy of magazine articles-- they are not all completely accurate.
Good opportunity to apply something I learned.

Skepticism. The last question focused on a very rough approximation of the degree of skepticism with respect to popular magazines. No pre-test measure was possible so the value of the estimate is poor. But, for what it may be worth with in the context of this paper student skepticism was mixed; 53% saying they were more skeptical and 47% saying not more skeptical after doing the assignment. However, 74% indicated that they were not more confident in the truth of popular literature, hence leading us to speculate that they may be more leery with respect to what popular magazines had to say. Lastly, and possibly most importantly 90% of the students responding indicated that they felt they were better able to critically evaluate an article as a result of the experience.

Discussion and Utility

From the results of the questionnaire it is evident that students enjoyed the assignment and got something out of it in terms of application of theory and criticism. While the data should not be generalized beyond the opinions of these students, it is useful for any instructor of interpersonal to consider such an assignment in the basic course as the possibility to increase student ability via criticism seems potentially quite high.

The assignment proved to be a straightforward and simple method to have students apply their knowledge of the

course material to everyday life through the use of popular magazines.

While popular magazines should not be used as the substantive base for an interpersonal course, I think that this paper has demonstrated their utility in terms of enhancing the instruction of theory through application.

Using popular literature in Interpersonal Communication

-THIS IS A BRIEF STUDY SEEKING YOUR OPINIONS ABOUT THE ASSIGNMENT OF DOING A CRITIQUE OF A POPULAR MAGAZINE ARTICLE IN INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION CLASS.

-THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY IS TO DETERMINE THE USEFULLNESS OF THE ASSIGNMENT FOR FUTURE INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION COURSES AND TO SHARE THESE FINDINGS WITH OTHERS WHO TEACH THIS PARTICULAR COURSE.

-YOUR RESPONSES ARE CONFIDENTIAL AND YOU WILL REMAIN COMPLETELY ANONYMOUS.

-YOUR COOPERATION IS GREATLY APPRECIATED, BUT REALIZE THAT YOU DO NOT HAVE TO PARTICIPATE: SHOULD YOU OBJECT TO THE NATURE OF THE STUDY OR SIMPLY NOT WISH TO FILL OUT THE ATTACHED QUESTIONAIRE.

THANK YOU.

PLEASE COMPLETE THE QUESTIONAIRE BEFORE LEAVING CLASS. IT WILL TAKE YOU APPROXIMATELY FIVE MINUTES TO DO SO. OTHERWISE, SHOULD YOU DESIRE MORE TIME PLEASE TURN IT IN TO MY MAILBOX IN THE COMMUNICATION STUDIES BUILDING.

TOM SOCHA

DO NOT PUT YOUR NAME ANYWHERE ON THESE SHEETS.

1. Age_____

2. Sex_____

3. Year in college_____

4. Your major_____

5. Why did you select the option to critique a popular magazine article?

6. From what magazine did you find an article to critique?

7. How often would you say you read this magazine?

   never___ sometimes___ farily often___ regularly___

8. Do you subscribe to the magazine listed in question 6?

   yes____ no____

9. List your top three favorite magazines:

   _____

   _____

   _____

10. Which of the following statements best characterizes the magazine you listed in question 6?

    more fact than fun_____
    more fun than fact_____
    equally fun and fact_____

11. How believable would you rate the particular article you chose to critique?

    not at all believable ____ somewhat believable ____ mostly believable ____ very believable ____

12. How do you respond to the following:

"If it is in a magazine it must be true."

strongly agree ___	moderatly agree ___	slightly agree ___	slightly disagree___	moderately disagree ___	strongly disagree___

13. Did you find the assignment useful? If so why? If not why not?

Answer:

14. After doing the critique would you say you are: (YES or NO)

More skeptical about popular literature than before_____

More confident in the truth of popular literature _____

Better able to critically evaluate an article _____

15. If you have any other comments about the assignment please list them here.

Thanks!

References

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